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The eyes have it: Some find life-altering results in vision therapy

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On Wednesday, 10-year-old Matt Morel of Caledonia came home from school with a social studies assignment and 10 or so questions to answer about Christopher Columbus. The everyday task might seem ho-hum in most households, but that the fifth-grader could tackle it on his own is cause for joy as far as his parents, Melanie and Keith, are concerned. A year ago, he couldn't have.



"Before Matt had vision therapy, there was no way he could read that and do it," declared his dedicated mom, who used to spend hour after frustrating hour trying to help her son slog through homework. "Even if he had an open book for an exercise in class, it was useless."

The routine school assignment illustrates as well as anything the life-changing triumphs the Morel family has witnessed since the fall of 2010.

At age 14, Kayla Williamson of Starkville had been on ADD medications since second grade and, in spite of varied curriculums, testing, specialists and speech therapy, struggled with learning.

Kayla's mother, Gale Belk, even left her bank job of 16 years to homeschool her daughter, sometimes reading to Kayla three or more hours a day to help improve vocabulary.

"I found that she may know a spelling word one day, and then the next day it would be as if she'd never seen it before," said Gale, who admits she and Kayla's stepdad, Ed, didn't know where to turn next.

While the adults around Matt and Kayla desperately sought answers and ran the gamut of testing for everything from ADD to dyslexia, the children were daily battling to keep words from dancing off the printed page, willing sentences to behave and stay in proper order -- just as thousands of children across the country with undiagnosed vision disorders do every day. It's usually a failing process that leads to academic and behavioral difficulties at school and at home.

"There's a difference between learning and coping," observed Gale, from her experience in the trenches. "If a child cannot learn, they're going to try to cope, and they'll reach a point where they can't cope anymore."

Hope

For these families, the breakthrough came when they found their way to developmental optometrist Dr. Sharon Snider in Birmingham, Ala.

Snider Therapy Centers Inc., with its satellite center at 306 Chubby Drive in Columbus, is one of the relatively small

number of practices in the country specializing in the field of neuro-visual rehabilitation.

Therapies include developmental vision therapy, sensory learning, neuro-optometric rehabilitation, auditory integration training, ocular phototherapy, interactive metronome and sports vision enhancement.

Angie Huskison is the chief vision therapist at the Columbus center, where patients in this region can undergo therapy after initial evaluation in Birmingham.

“Vision and learning are so connected. And vision problems can be easily mistaken for learning disabilities, ADD, ADHD or dyslexia,” she stated. “We also see individuals who have been diagnosed with Asperger’s or autism, or have suffered brain injury.”

Using neuro-visual rehabilitative therapy, success rates in the 85-99 percentile range have routinely been achieved, shared Dr. Snider, who holds board certification with the College of Optometrists in Vision Development (COVD) and with the American Academy of Optometry (AAO).

The 20/20 myth

It is possible to test 20/20 in a visual acuity test -- which measures sharpness of vision at a distance of 20 feet -- and still have severe problems, Huskison stressed.

Eye charts can’t check eye-tracking (following a line of print), eye-teaming (two eyes working together as a synchronized team), binocular vision (simultaneously blending images from both eyes into one image), accommodation (focusing), visual-motor integration (eye-hand coordination) or visual perception (visual memory, form perception and visualization).

Finally, some answers

After initial evaluation in Birmingham, Matt’s and Kayla’s families were in for some surprises.

“Matt had hardly any peripheral vision at all,” said his mother, Melanie. “He had eye tracking issues and auditory issues, as well.”

In Kayla’s case, “What they found is that Kayla had what they call binocular vision,” Gale shared. “She had the mechanics to see peripherally, but her brain was only processing information within a small window in front of her eyes. She also had a tracking problem. She was working probably three or four times harder than others to see a word.”

When therapists first showed the Belks a visual simulation of what printed words usually looked like to Kayla, Gale admits she broke down.

“The words were all over the page. I apologized to her; I’d been tough on her. We had spent all these years, pulling her, pushing her, trying to see if it was disobedience. We’d tried every angle. ... All along, she honestly wanted to please me, as all children do, but she physically could not do it.”

Seeing more clearly

In Columbus, Huskison and fellow vision therapists Lisa Smith, Sheri Robertson, Elizabeth Parker and Vicky Schrepferman work with patients to carry out Dr. Snider’s individualized therapy plans and goals.

Most patients attend therapy once or twice a week for three to 12 months, depending on the nature and severity of the condition. Often, home therapy is prescribed to reinforce new skills learned in therapy.

A variety of optometric tools and activities are utilized. Patients might work on a low balance beam, wearing specialized glasses that help improve spatial awareness and visual coordination. Or they may place pegs wheels on a patterned, spinning wheel, wearing tinted glasses that test the eyes’ focus and comprehension.

An aperture rule helps eyes learn to converge fields of vision to see a single, clear image. A polaroid vectogram allows patients to work with a variety of merging slides to train central or peripheral vision.

Phototherapy, an advanced branch of light therapy, uses visible light frequencies (colors) to enhance visual attention.

These are only a few of the methods therapists use. The ultimate goal is to get both eyes and brain working as a cohesive team.

Adults, too

Vision problems aren’t limited to children, of course. Many adults seek help, too.

Snider Therapy Center patient Jeffrey Unruh, 38, was born with an “eye turn,” which was corrected by surgery when he was a toddler. But the Macon farmer was always aware his left eye wasn’t as efficient as his right, and he had problems focusing. After reading the book “Fixing my Gaze,” by Susan R. Barry, he was motivated to act.

“I didn’t know vision therapy existed until I started researching it,” he said. “I don’t think many people, especially parents, do know.

“Vision therapy goes beyond just fixing the (eye) turn. It endeavors to fix the problem, to get the eyes both seeing equal strength and create that stereo vision,” Unruh said.

“I’m planning on giving it a year; I’ve had about 25 to 30 sessions, and it’s helped me significantly. I’d strongly recommend it. ... It can be a good combination with surgery if you have an eye turn.”

Seeing is believing

Like most patients, Kayla and Matt are seeing the world differently these days.

Matt, for the time being, has his sights set on being a scientist and is relishing the new world that’s opened up to him.

“It’s life-changing, that’s all I can say,” his mom stated. “It’s just life-changing. It’s a big-time commitment, but I would absolutely do it over again. I believe in it 100 percent.”

In early therapy, Kayla’s visual memory measured in the fifth percentile, and some of her numbers were at the kindergarten level, her mother revealed. “After a year of therapy, her visual memory scores were in the 84th

percentile, and she was reading books that I would read!" Gale said "It's wonderful ... we're actually getting to know and enjoy our daughter again."

"All of it is easier," shared Kayla, who is now a big fan of author Dee Henderson's O'Malley mystery series and is learning to play guitar. She's also on a robotics team -- and off all medications. "And every year before, I couldn't hit a ball. Now I'm playing softball; I can hit the ball, and I pretty much catch every popfly," she said proudly.

Her mom, Gale, added, "Now she builds self-esteem herself because she can accomplish things without me -- and you can't put a price tag on that. That's priceless."

Editor's note: Snider Therapy Center in Columbus will host informational one-hour Lunch & Learn seminars Sept. 22 and Sept. 27 from noon-1 p.m. (\$8 for catered lunch), and a free evening seminar Oct. 6, 6:30-7:30 p.m. Make reservations at 662-328-3190.

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